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ABSTRACT

This study sought to discover how 91 counselor trainees felt about participating in an encounter group as part of their program. Subjects responded to pre-course, post-course, and followup questionnaires dealing with their attitudes toward groups and the actual group experience, and behavioral change attributable to the group experience. Significant others were used in the followup to either corroborate or deny the self-perceptions of the group participants. Participant attitudes toward encounter groups became markedly more positive after they had undergone a group experience, and an overwhelming majority of them felt that the course should be taught as a sensitivity or encounter group. Participants reported behavioral changes as a result of the group experience, and the vast majority described the overall impact of the group as helpful, constructive, or deeply meaningful; moreover, the group experience seems to have had a lasting effect on the participants. On the basis of the finding of this study, the encounter group appears to be valuable as a training experience for counselors. (Author/LKP)

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"THE BASIC ENCOUNTER GROUP IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION -- FACTS AND FANCIES"

by

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Introduction

Graduate programs in Counselor Education have undergone, this past decade, something of an overhauling insofar as their course offerings, specific course content, and underlying philosophies in, and approaches to, graduate-level instruction are concerned. Most noticeable, and perhaps most controversial, has been the increasing utilization of groups -- training, sensitivity, encounter, and/or self-awareness -- in the formal education of counselors-to-be. The rationale behind this seems to be that participation in an intensive group experience will help to put future counselors more "in-touch" with themselves -- who they are, what they believe in, what their own strengths and weaknesses are -- and with others, so that when they become involved in the real heart of the Counselor Education program -- the counseling theory and practice, and the counseling practicum courses, and still later when they become practicing counselors -- that they will not play-act the role of counselor, but rather that they will actually be authentic counselors and human beings.

All of the foregoing presupposes that individual behavioral and dispositional change <u>can be</u> facilitated via personal involvement in a group experience of this sort; yet the research does not totally substantiate this supposition. As a matter of fact, one of the most glaring deficiencies surrounding the use of groups as a training device is that remarkably little research has been conducted on them. (Rosenthal 1971). In one of the most comprehensive and well-designed studies on encounter groups (Lieberman, Yalom, Miles 1971), an overwhelming majority (75 per cent) of participants reported immediately

afterward that their involvement in an encounter group had resulted in positive change in themselves, and of these, 75 per cent expected the changes to be lasting. Gibb (1970), after analyzing 106 research studies relating to encounter group experiences, states that, "The evidence is strong that intensive group training experiences have therapeutic effects.... (that) changes do occur in sensitivity, ability to manage feelings, directionality of motivation, attitudes toward the self, attitudes toward others, and interdependence." On the other hand, a number of studies (Klaw 1965; Underwood 1965; Schein and Bennis 1965) report more unfavorable, than favorable, behavior change in participants after involvement in an intensive group experience. And so the issue remains largely unresolved, and the debate continues unabated.

METHODOLOGY

For the past three years, 1970-73, Villanova University has included a basic encounter group experience in its graduate Counselor Education program for counselors-in-training. The course, Group Guidance and Counseling, is a required, initial course in Villanova's Counselor Education sequence. The overriding goal of the course is to facilitate personal and interpersonal growth among the members. Students are encouraged to experiment with their behavior by attempting to relate to others in new ways, to be as open and self-disclosing as they dare to be, to express feelings and emotions, to confront each other in a responsible and caring manner, to "listen" actively to both verbal and nonverbal cues, to avoid generalities and deal in specifics, and to care for one another in a genuine, humane way. Lectures are dispensed with entirely, as are term papers and formal examinations, and students

are asked to determine their own grades, based upon their own personal development during the course.

Over the past three semesters, 91 students who participated in the group course with the author of this study were administered a pre-course, post-course, and follow-up questionnaire (the latter completed at least six months following their involvement in the course). The questionnaire was structured rather loosely after the questionnaire utilized by Carl Rogers in his follow-up study of more than five hundred individuals who had been in groups which he had conducted (Rogers 1970).

The basic purpose of the pre-course questionnaire was to ascertain the counseling students' initial attitudes toward encounter groups and to their upcoming involvement in a group structured along these lines. The post-course questionnaire sought to assess the students' reactions to their just-completed encounter group experience, as well as to ascertain whether they perceived any changes in their personal behavior. The follow-up questionnaire attempted to elicit responses (at least six months "after the fact") regarding their feelings toward encounter groups, as well as any carry-over effect which they perceived the group experience to have had on their behavior and interactions with others. In addition, two cohorts, or "significant others," of each group participant completed companion questionnaires on the participant, so that a comparison could be made between the participants' self-perceptions and the perceptions of their cohorts.

As with any self-reporting technique which attempts to assess attitudinal and behavioral change, there is the difficulty that the

subjects might be less than candid or objective in reporting about themselves. It was hoped that the follow-up questionnaires which were to be completed by two "significant others" (spouse, relative, close friend, colleague) would serve either to corroborate or deny the self-perceptions of the group participants.

SAMPLE

Of the 91 group participants surveyed, all of them completed the pre- and post-course questionnaires and 64 of them (70.3 percent) returned usuable follow-up questionnaires. 117 cohorts of these 64 group members returned usable companion questionnaires in the follow-up survey. Following are the participants' and cohorts' responses to the various questions, expressed in terms of percentages of total responses:

1. What are your present feelings about sensitivity or encounter groups?

	Pre-Course	Post-Course	Follow-Up	Cohorts
Highly Positive	13%	77%	67%	44%
Slightly Positive	35%	18%	27%	33%
Neutral, Undecided	39%	0%	3%	15%
Slightly Negative	11%	5%	1.5%	6%
Highly Negative	2%	0%	1.5%	2%

2. How do you feel about future counselors undergoing a sensitivity or encounter group experience as part of their graduate education?

	Pre-Course	Post-Course	Follow-Up	Cohorts
Highly Positive	58%	93%	91%	---
Slightly Positive	24%	6%	6%	---
Neutral, Undecided	17%	1%	0%	---
Slightly Negative	1%	0%	1.5%	---
Highly Negative	0%	0%	1.5%	---

3. If you had a choice, would you prefer to have the course taught as a

	Pre-Course	Post-Course	Follow-up	Cohorts
Lecture Discussion	10%	0%	3%	---
Sensitivity encounter group	68%	93%	78%	---
Combination of above	22%	7%	19%	---

4. Do you feel as though there has been any noticeable behavior change in you since your involvement in this course?

	Pre-Course	Post-Course	Follow-up	Cohorts
No	---	14%	23%	42%
Yes, a positive change	---	86%	74%	56%
Yes, a negative change	---	0%	3%	2%

5. If you reported a behavioral change, what was the reason for the change?

	Pre-Course	Post-Course	Follow-up	Cohorts
Group involvement	---	97%	62%	59%
Other reason	---	3%	2%	8%
Combination of Group and others	---	0%	36%	33%

* 6. If you reported a behavioral change, with whom was it most evident?

	Follow-up	Cohorts
Spouse	28	26
Children	10	6
Parents	22	19
Friends	41	42
Co-workers	29	32
Superiors	21	23
Subordinates	19	16

* (Statistics here are presented in the form of numbers of resonses

rather than percentage of responses inasmuch as participants and cohorts, in most cases, reported behavioral changes with more than one sub-group. Participants reported changes with an average of 3.47 sub-groups; cohorts reported changes in the participants with an average of 2.73 sub-groups.)

7. How would you describe the overall impact of the group on you?

	Follow-up	Cohorts
Damaging	0%	0%
Frustrating	3%	3%
Confusing	0%	5%
Unhelpful	0%	1%
Neutral	5%	19%
Helpful	15%	21%
Constructive	44%	33%
Deeply Meaningful	33%	18%

DISCUSSION

The above seven questions can be rather neatly dichotomized into attitudes toward groups and the actual group experience (questions 1,2,3, and 7), and behavioral change attributable to the group experience (questions 4,5, and 6). Let us look first at the attitudes of participants.

Prior to their involvement in the group course, only 48% of the participants felt positive (either highly or slightly positive) and 39% were neutral or undecided about sensitivity or encounter groups. Immediately after their involvement in the group course, fully 95% had positive feelings toward groups and none were neutral or undecided. Six months later,

94% of the former participants still felt positive toward groups, thus indicating that their attitudes toward groups had, indeed, changed markedly and had remained changed in a very positive fashion.

Regarding counselors taking part in a sensitivity/encounter group experience, (question 2) 82% felt favorably disposed toward this prior to their involvement, and 99% felt so immediately afterward. In the follow-up survey, 97% still felt positive toward counselors undergoing a group experience. Again, this seems to indicate that the participants' attitudes had been changed in a positive direction and had remained so.

Regarding the format of the course, 68% of the participants favored an encounter group format prior to their involvement. After the course, 93% were so disposed, but this tailed-off to 78% in the six month follow-up survey, with another 19% favoring a combination of group experience and lecture-discussion format.

In the follow-up survey, 92% of the respondents reported that the group had been either a helpful, constructive, or deeply meaningful experience for them. 72% of the cohorts of the group participants reported that the experience had been either helpful, constructive, or deeply meaningful. None of the participants or cohorts described the experience as damaging, and only 1% of the cohorts described the experience as unhelpful. By far, it seems to have been a positive, constructive experience for the participants.

Insofar as behavior change is concerned, 86% of the participants reported a positive change in their behavior immediately following the course. Six months later, 74% still felt that there had been a positive change in their behavior. In the follow-up survey of cohorts, 56% of them felt that there had been a positive change in the participants' behavior. Only 3% of the participants and 2% of the cohorts, in the follow-up survey, felt that there had been a negative behavioral change since the group experience had ended.

For those participants who reported a behavioral change, 97% attributed the change to their involvement in the group immediately after the course had terminated. In the follow-up survey, this dropped off to 62%, although another 36% felt that the behavioral change which they reported was attributable to both the group experience and other factors. The reponses of the cohorts were markedly similar to the participants on this question.

Finally, participants and cohorts were requested to enumerate those people with whom behavioral change was most evident. No attempt was made to correlate participants' and cohorts' responses as to their match, but it was apparent that many similarities did exist. Most participants who reported a behavioral change reported it with more than one person; in fact, the average number of persons named was 3.47 for the participants and 2.73 for the cohorts. The persons with whom change was most evident were friends, co-workers, and spouses,

with parents, superiors, and subordinates not too far behind in the total tally.

Perhaps of even more interest to the reader, than a composite statistical picture of the participants, would be selected statements made by several of the participants and cohorts in the follow-up survey:

> I am grateful that I was able to get concrete help in developing interpersonal skills. I feel this course has given me increased insight and understanding that will lead to improved interpersonal relations in whatever situation I may find myself as a counselor.
>
> I think the most powerful and long-lasting effect my group experiences have had on me has been the way I react to others. Before I say anything to someone, I find myself considering what I should say, and how I should say it, in order to benefit that person.
>
> I am more confident in my dealings with other people. I express my values more -- and most important -- I listen to people more.
>
> I guess the basic change is internal -- an awareness, a good feeling, an attitude. I want to be open to change in others and in myself.
>
> The group experience enabled me to relate to people I never knew before and really learn from them. I gained personal confidence and a much deeper caring for people.
>
> I no longer try to please everyone. I now do my best to do what I can, and if I truly believe it is my best, I am truly able to say I am doing my best.
>
> I am a more intent listener in that I can more completely concentrate on what others are saying without having my replies going through my head before people are finished speaking.
>
> The group helped me to believe in myself and to act accordingly. I no longer feel I have to compromise myself to the situation. I'm in control.

The group taught me that I wasn't really being honest with myself. I admitted things about myself to the group that I hadn't faced up to. It was a tremendously moving experience.

(Cohort) ------- seems more perceptive to the needs of others. The group made her more sensitive to the importance of feelings, problems, and attitudes.

(Cohorts) The group experience has helped my husband to the utmost degree. Our marriage is much happier; our social life is much better; his professional life has improved; and I feel this is just the beginning. Call it a rebirth or an awakening. Whatever, I am thankful, and I'm sure he is, too.

IMPLICATIONS

On the basis of the findings of this study, it would appear that the encounter group, as a training experience for future counselors, has far more merits than even its staunchest advocates had previously thought; and that the dangers presumed to be associated with this type of training are as minimal as they are in other, "safer" modes of training. Group participants' attitudes toward encounter groups became markedly more positive after they had undergone such an experience, and an overwhelming majority of them felt that the course should be taught as a sensitivity or encounter group. Participants especially, but cohorts as well, reported behavioral changes as a result of the group experience, and the vast majority of both groups described the overall impact of the group as helpful, constructive, or deeply meaningful. Moreover, the group experience seems to have had a lasting, rather than just a transitory, effect on the participants.

Of course, the group participants could very well have been so enthralled by the group experience itself (and/or a "placebo

effect") that they might have reported more glowing results than were actually accrued; yet, the cohorts' reports were only slightly less glowing. And so it appears that, at the very least, the group experience held far more positive, than negative or neutral, outcomes.

Future researchers would do well to design experimental-control group studies of the encounter group experience for training counselors, and to design even more longitudinal studies of "graduates" of encounter groups as they matriculate in the more advanced Counselor Education courses like Counseling Theory and Practice, and the Counseling Practicum, and still later when they are involved as counseling practitioners.

For the time being, though, it appears as though the encounter group as a training device for counselors has received a very solid endorsement from the subjects in this sample. Perhaps more Counselor Education programs should give it more serious consideration as a training modality.

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